

## Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/36466411) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/36466411>.

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| Rating:          | <a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Archive Warning: | <a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Category:        | <a href="#">M/M</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Fandom:          | <a href="#">Hannibal (TV)</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Relationships:   | <a href="#">Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter</a> , <a href="#">Chiyoh/Beverly Katz</a> , <a href="#">Jimmy Price/Brian Zeller</a> , <a href="#">Alana Bloom/Margot Verger</a> , <a href="#">Will Graham &amp; Beverly Katz</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Characters:      | <a href="#">Will Graham</a> , <a href="#">Hannibal Lecter</a> , <a href="#">Will Graham's Father</a> , <a href="#">Chiyoh (Hannibal)</a> , <a href="#">Beverly Katz</a> , <a href="#">Jimmy Price</a> , <a href="#">Brian Zeller</a> , <a href="#">Jack Crawford</a> , <a href="#">Alana Bloom</a> , <a href="#">Margot Verger</a> , <a href="#">Mason Verger</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Additional Tags: | <a href="#">they're pen pals</a> , <a href="#">High School AU</a> , <a href="#">Hannibal Lecter is Not a Cannibal</a> , <a href="#">yet - Freeform</a> , <a href="#">Will Graham is a Mess</a> , <a href="#">Someone Help Will Graham</a> , <a href="#">French Class</a> , <a href="#">Autistic Will Graham</a> , <a href="#">hannibal and chiyoh are at a school in paris</a> , <a href="#">will graham has dogs</a> , <a href="#">and he loves them :)</a> , <a href="#">jrotc will graham</a> , <a href="#">jrotc beverly katz</a> , <a href="#">the american high school experience tm</a> , <a href="#">femme jimmy price</a> , <a href="#">semi verbal hannibal lecter</a> , <a href="#">will graham has dissociative trance disorder/osdd 4</a> , <a href="#">Will Graham Has Nightmares</a> , <a href="#">Hannibal Lecter Has Nightmares</a> , <a href="#">Vulnerable Hannibal Lecter</a> , <a href="#">Hannibal Lecter is Il Mostro</a> , <a href="#">hannibal lecter has killed a man</a> , <a href="#">maybe two</a> |
| Language:        | English                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Stats:           | Published: 2022-01-16 Updated: 2023-07-14 Words: 16,295 Chapters: 6/?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

# Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

by [oompadearest](#)

## Summary

Hannibal Lecter,

Hi. My name is Will Graham. I'm a student in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. My French class has to write your English class for a project. I think you know that. I also think you know that I couldn't care less. That sucks.

You look interesting, from your picture. Your eyes are very nice, but cold. I wonder what you do in your free time. Maybe you kick puppies. You look like you kick puppies. In a fashionable way, like Cruella de Vil, but maybe not quite like that because you'd do it in a more fashionable way.

We don't have much information on our pen pals yet. I know of the classes you're taking, at least. It's literature. I'm not interested in literature, but I do work with cars in school. I take a class on cars. It's cool. I had it yesterday. We learned about changing oil.

You look like my friend's mom. Not really, but your smile. It's similar. It's kind of pretty.

Will Graham

Or, Will Graham learns the value of beautiful handwriting.

# I

**October 3, 2021**

Waking up in the morning is Will's least favorite activity. Going to chemistry, though, is second on the list.

Margot Verger and her breathy voice are grating on their own, but accompanied by the lack of coffee in his system, Will Graham thinks he would kill to shut her up. Yet she's sitting next to him, gently drumming her nails on her desk and sighing with every opportunity. It's not like the two of them are close, really; ever since a one-night-stand turned into Margot trying to make Will a father at fifteen, he hasn't particularly liked her. He understands, of course, *why*, but he can't bring himself to forgive her. And still she sits, breathing through her voice, and Will wants to choke her. He frowns.

With a sigh of his own, he pulls a battered notebook from his backpack and flips it to a clean page. Mindless doodles are one thing to keep him grounded, and he indulges his whims with a drawing that quickly turns from just a feather to an extravagant ornament. The teacher drones on, oblivious to the students sleeping in her care. On, and on, and on, she speaks. *Wind them up and watch them go.* Brian Zeller catches his eye from across the class, and Will offers him a tired grin. He's one of the kids to whom everyone refers by his last name. It doesn't make sense, of course, but he is. He's just Zeller. It's not like Will cares, but he figures he has nothing better to do than to psychoanalyze a friend.

At the very thought of a friend, his phone lights up. He spares it a glance, not exactly bothered to read what the group chat has to say so early. Will's brain is on his drawing, his lunch, his dinner...

He figures it couldn't hurt to check the group chat.

**katz the musical** : *did you hear what's going on in french*

**zest** : *no bev it's first period and we don't even have french today*

**katz the musical** : *fine spoilsport*

**katz the musical** : *i'm just not going to tell you >:(*

**Jimmy John's Delivery Boy** : *Anyone have the algebra hw answers?*

**zest** : *i'll trade them for your apple at lunch*

**Jimmy John's Delivery Boy** : *Signed, sealed, delivered*

The discussion changes to one of algebra homework, away from the French announcement Beverly promised. He supposes it's for the best; the idea of French class, this early in the

morning, fills Will with dread. He kind of wants to know, now. It's not like Beverly can keep a non-essential secret for long. Oh, shit. Fuck.

**the anti-masturbator** : *Did we have French homework?*

**the anti-masturbator** : *Beverly, stop changing my name.*

**the anti-masturbator renamed himself.**

**Will** : *I can't remember if we did or not.*

**katz the musical** : *it was supposed to be funny >:(*

**Will** : *If I change my name to Graham Cracker, will you stop pouting? I can hear you from over here.*

**katz the musical** : *the joke was that the creator of the graham cracker made it to stop kids from masturbating*

**Will renamed himself.**

**Graham Cracker** : *What?*

**katz the musical** : *you didn't know?????*

**Graham Cracker** : *Why would I know something like that, Beverly Hadrian Katz?*

**katz the musical** : *sorry MOM you dont have to use the full name*

With a grin, Will retires his phone to his pocket, though not before smiling at the dog on his homescreen. Buster is a sweetheart. An absolute treasure. A terror. A king. Will loves him. He remembers, somewhere, to feign paying attention, so he leans back in his chair and folds his arms and thinks *to Hell with it*.

He breathes a sigh of relief as the shrill shriek of the bell hits his ears, then jumps up to leave. Vaguely he hears Margot calling a goodbye, and vaguely he mumbles one back, but he's just tired enough that it all feels like an unpleasant dream.

World history and auto tech pass in a whirlwind of color. He doesn't remember much; a comment from Zeller to their friend Jimmy about his skirt, a vaguely familiar girl in one of his classes, Alana Bloom and her burning blue eyes. He doesn't see her at all on his B block days, but she still manages to pass him in the hallways and shoot looks at him that have him seriously doubting his own sanity.

Just because he can't focus, now everyone treats him like he's going to crack. Great.

"Willy! Bill! Liam! Guy!" Beverly's shouts startle him. He whirls around, hands up, raring for a fight that never comes. "Come on, Will, you've been standing here forever and my mom is gonna be mad if we're not there, like, right now."

"Hm?" Will looks around, disoriented. Beverly is wearing a sort of confused expression, mixed with about a million other things that Will frankly does not care to decipher. He takes in a deep breath. "What time is it?"

"Will, we got out ten minutes ago. Come on." Gentle, but insistent, Beverly grabs his arm and begins tugging him towards the spot her mother always picks them up at. He follows, blinking blandly at the sudden rush of light, and stumbles as soon as Beverly manages to push him towards the car. Will climbs in on autopilot and sets his backpack down.

"Are you feeling alright, buddy?" Beverly's voice is *annoying*, and Will wants to shove a pencil through her trachea. His hands shake, first with the urge, and then with horror. "You look really pale..."

"Fine," Will stammers, nodding vigorously. He shoves his hands into his pockets. "Just fine."

Will stares through the window, cataloguing the trees he knows by heart. Just as soon as he starts, he and Beverly are getting out of the car, waving to her mother as she drives away.

"Why's your mom gone, again...?"

"To get groceries."

"When did that happen?"

"Will... are you really feeling alright? Because you look like shit."

"Do you have any aspirin?"

"Yeah, let me just... do you want to, like, watch something...?"

Privately, Will thinks that he would like to go to sleep. He can't fault Beverly for being a good friend. If he had any more sense, he would thank her. He opens his mouth to thank her. He thanks her. She smiles and nods, running to fetch the aspirin, and Will processes her words while she's away.

He dumps his bag on the couch, leaning back against the cushions with a groan.

"You've been really space-y all day," Bev chirps, offering Will a glass of water and two shiny red pills.

"You're an angel," he drawls in return, downing both the pills and the water in just a few gulps.

"Right. Well, I'm gonna watch something. C'mere."

"Huh?"

As if on impulse, Beverly pulls Will into her arms. He stiffens, and she laughs. "Relax, Will. You just looked like you needed a hug."

Her words draw a sigh from him. She's right. She always is. He melts into her, refusing to admit it, and she buries her nose in his curls as a reward.

"Chill out, little buddy. I'm sure it'll be okay."

## October 4, 2021

His breakfast the next morning is rushed and careless, but surprising, considering he doesn't usually bother. Beverly's comments about French class twist in his gut, though, and he wants some food should Crawford spring anything on him. The old man was up for anything, it seemed, especially something that would work his *beloved students* to the bone. They had enough to do, preparing for the AP test, that Will didn't particularly want something more saddled on his shoulders.

He rides an early train to Baltimore. It's only 06:30, and he's exhausted. He grips his worn thermos of coffee tighter, using it to shield him from his fellow passengers. Finally, he gets to his waiting place, and sits and admires the sky (or what's left of it, at least, so torn by pollution) until Beverly does her usual routine.

"What's your rate, baby?" She leans out of the passenger window and winks, drawing a laugh from Will. "How much an hour?"

"With a face like that, darlin', I'll do it for free." He grins, opening up the white car door and sliding inside. "Hey, Ms. Minnie."

Min-seo Katz is a good-looking woman. Will has to admit that, even if it's a little weird to be thinking his best friend's mom is good-looking. She's even prettier when she wears her smile—an acute, Sphinx-like thing that brightens her eyes and makes her look ten years younger. She's probably the best woman Will has ever met, he thinks, or will meet. Now, she grins. "Only sixteen, and my daughter's already picking up hookers. A girl after my own heart." The three in the car share a laugh on the drive to school. Beverly leans over to give Will a piece of gum.

"No, no, no!" Beverly waves a hand, snatching the gum away just as Will tries to peel it open. "That's for French today! Uncle Jack's gonna freak. It's gonna be awesome."

"Is your life centered around antagonizing our French teacher?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Alright, count me in."

"Whew! Knew I could count on you, Graham."

"Yeah, yeah. You're on fish duty today."

"What?! Really? You're gonna throw me to the wolves like that?" Beverly laughs. "Typical."

Will rolls his eyes, completely unenthused about the idea of dealing with first-year cadets today. He joined the AFJROTC corps for fun, stayed because of the marksmanship program, and regrets it because someone decided he should be halfway in charge of educating the next generation. No, thank you. He shoves Beverly, pushing her into the door and drawing her mother's ire.

"I will kick you both out of this car if you don't quit fooling around," she snaps, but she's betrayed by the smile in her eyes.

"Yes, mother," chant Will and Beverly in unison. As soon as Ms. Minnie quits looking, however, they begin their battle.

First period JROTC has never been a favored activity of Will's, but it's much better than chemistry. He and Beverly corral the children (are they really only a year younger?) and Beverly starts on morning announcements. He sits in the back, glaring at the kids who try to speak over their flight commander. Since they're stuck there for an hour and a half, they go outside into the morning light, practicing drill for the better part of the period. When they go back inside, it's to the sound of the bell, and Will rushes back to the classroom to grab his bag. He and Beverly make their way to the French classroom, conveniently located all the way across the school and up a flight of stairs, and barely slide in before the bell rings.

Beverly runs to the board to scrawl her fact-of-the-day (*fait du jour*, proclaims the childish handwriting), something about vampire folklore, then rushes to take her seat. Will leisurely strolls across the floor, dropping into his own with a patience he doesn't feel.

They join Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller, both of whom Will doesn't consciously recall referring to by their full names. Jimmy looks nice, as usual; all pale legs and florals, today, while Zeller is dressed in his patented graphic T-shirt and jeans combo. Their darling Uncle Jack paces back and forth at the front of the classroom, glaring at the bedraggled Will and Beverly for almost being late (as if they don't do this same routine every other day). Then, he clears his throat, with a smile that can only be described as menacing.

"Today marks the beginning of a year-long project."

Will holds back a groan.

"You'll be writing to pen pals in France this year."

Will releases his groan. Fortunately, he's not the only one.

"Really, Beverly? This was the big secret?"

"No," says Beverly, looking genuinely puzzled. "I thought the big secret was that--"

"Miss Katz." Crawford swivels around, staring Beverly in the face, and she flushes.

"Sorry!"

"Now what was that all about?" whispers Jimmy, joining his head with Zeller's and glancing around conspiratorially.

"Beats me," Will chimes, then offers the two of them a shrug. "But really? *Pen pals*?"

"Now, now." Crawford frowns at the class. "It's going to be for a grade, so you'd better settle down and listen."

Will tunes him out, of course, glancing towards Beverly every now and again before he's presented with a picture.

"What the--" Will glances up at Crawford, then back down to his photo-- "*heck* is this?"

"It's a picture of the guy you're gonna write to," Beverly mutters, staring down at her own piece of colored cardstock. She's lucky, it seems; in her hands is a pretty, if intense, Asian girl. Chinese? No, Japanese, Will thinks, remembering Beverly's (and Ms. Minnie's) lecture on how to tell the difference.

Finally, he twirls the picture in his hands around, straightening it out and frowning.

The boy in the picture (though he doesn't look like a boy; he looks old, even as a student) stares through the paper, fixing Will with a Sphinx-like smile almost exactly like Ms. Minnie's and cold eyes to match. Though, looking again, his eyes aren't actually that bad-looking. He seems to be well-off, judging by the way he holds himself. It's just a student identification photo, but Will finds himself shivering regardless.

*Hannibal Lecter.*

"I'm sorry, what in the actual fuck?"

"Huh?" Jimmy leans over, eyeing the man like a piece of meat. "Damn, Will. Nice."

"Okay, but who the fuck names their *child* ... Hannibal. Hannibal *Lecter*."

"Sounds exotic," Zeller adds, grinning.

"Of course he's exotic. He's fucking French."

"Not with those cheekbones, he's not." Beverly joins the conversation, tilting her head as if trying to make sense of the man on the paper. "He's gotta be, like... like... I dunno. Not French."

Jimmy leans over with a challenging look on his face. "Oh, yeah? How would you know?"

Oh, Christ. The bickering is already giving Will a headache.

"French people don't look so hard. They look softer. This guy, though? He's just lines and lines and lines. Man, you really have all the luck."

"If I had luck," mutters Will, "I wouldn't have to do this stupid project in the first place."

Unfortunately, Crawford's voice cuts through the air, drawing his attention once more only to announce that *it's time to start writing your first letter*.

On the board is a list of things they should include, he explains, and the phrases for them in French. Will is already zoning out. He doesn't care. Too bad it's for a grade, really. He's about to fail.

*Hannibal Lecter.* What a name. He writes the heading just like that, with his dagger-like script. He adds a date, too, just to be funny. *4 octobre 2021.* October 4th.

*Hannibal Lecter,*

*Hi. My name is Will Graham. I'm a student in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. My French class has to write your English class for a project. I think you know that.*

Will sighs. Of course. Of course he would get stuck writing to a boy named *Hannibal fucking Lecter*. Life really is a cruel joke.

He glances to the right, surprised by the sudden calm of the class. Beverly is writing words in French with Google Translate open on her phone, her tongue sticking from her mouth in a show of concentration. It seems she's forgotten about her grand plan to annoy Mr. Crawford. Jimmy has a dictionary propped up on his desk, clearly not one for heathenism. Will smiles approvingly, though it only lasts half a second, before ducking his head once more.

Near the end of the block, he wakes from his reverie only to find his letter already written. *Thank God dissociated Will is productive this one time.* As he reads it over, alarms start ringing in his mind. He can't believe he got so carried away.

*Hannibal Lecter,*

*Hi. My name is Will Graham. I'm a student in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. My French class has to write your English class for a project. I think you know that. I also think you know that I couldn't care less. That sucks.*

*You look interesting, from your picture. Your eyes are very nice, but cold. I wonder what you do in your free time. Maybe you kick puppies. You look like you kick puppies. In a fashionable way, like Cruella de Vil, but maybe not quite like that because you'd do it in a more fashionable way.*

*We don't have much information on our pen pals yet. I know of the classes you're taking, at least. It's literature. I'm not interested in literature, but I do work with cars in school. I take a class on cars. It's cool. I had it yesterday. We learned about changing oil.*

*You look like my friend's mom. Not really, but your smile. It's similar. It's kind of pretty.*

*Will Graham*

Will reads it again, then starts frantically scribbling sentences out. Kicking puppies?! *Kind of pretty ?* He had just let his mind take over, occasionally poking Beverly so she'd type something into Google for him. He didn't mean to ramble like this.

Looking around, he realizes some people have written full pages, while he has less than half of one and most of it is scribbled out. Oh, well. It'll have to do. The time to leave is

approaching, and Will couldn't care less. As the bell rings, he drops the paper on Crawford's desk and bids his friends *goodbye for now* . Au revoir, au revoir, au revoir.

Algebra crawls by, and English rushes through him like a whirlwind. He doesn't give a damn about poetry. He can't stand the useless language, the purple prose that makes everything completely unreadable. And who the hell is Robert Frost, anyway? Beverly laughs and drags him out to the car. He's wonderfully present. He cracks jokes with her the whole way home, drawing Ms. Minnie's indulgent Sphinx smile out.

He helps Beverly cook dinner, since it's her turn anyway, and manages to serve up some good box mac-n-cheese to compliment her bagged fried fish. She drags him to her room afterwards, and they flop down on the bed together to talk.

"Okay, Will."

"Hm?"

"Spill. What's the scoop on this guy?"

"Um. He's... European."

"Okay, but, like. Do you think he's hot?"

"...Beverly? Aren't you a lesbian?"

"I'm not attracted to shoes, but I can tell when a pair looks good. Can you?"

Will, baffled, shakes his head and laughs. "Never mind that."

"Okay, so let's talk Alana."

"Oh, jeez. Let's not."

"She was *totally* staring at you today."

"She looked like she wanted to kill me."

"Hate to break it to ya, sweetie, but that's how women flirt."

"Oh, yeah? How would you know?"

"Lesbian. Woman. Remember?"

"You flirt by threatening to kill someone?"

"Loudly and often."

"Have I ever told you how annoying you are?"

"Refer to my previous statement."

They fall into an amicable silence, punctuated by occasional peals of laughter or the shock of an Instagram video playing too loudly. Will can't help but cry at all the cute dogs. Beverly, like the best friend she is, pretends not to notice.

At least, she pretends not to notice until Will's phone lights up. At the sight of the caller ID, she frowns. "So soon?"

"It's seven."

"Right. So soon?"

"I really should be getting home."

"Hmph."

"Sorry, Bev. Wanna walk me to the train station?"

"Sure."

In the cool evening air, Will's phone rings incessantly. He sighs and ignores it every time. When he's finally on the train, waving goodbye to Beverly, he answers.

"Hel- lo ?"

"Don't you speak to me like that."

"Sorry, Dad."

"Where are you?"

Will flinches. "Heading home."

"This kitchen is fuckin' filthy."

"Yeah, I'll get it."

"And you better not let me catch you with anything."

"No, Dad."

"I'm checking you over tonight."

"Sure."

"Excuse you?"

"Yes, sir."

His father hangs up and Will sighs, half from relief and half from *something* else. He knows the home will stink of whiskey when he finally gets back, half-past nine. His hypothesis

(theory, fact) is proven correct when he pushes open the door. Only Buster and his barking greet him; Will figures his father must be fast asleep.

Quickly, he tidies up the kitchen, then tends to Buster's angry little yaps. "I get it, I get it," he laughs, offering the dog a few pats for his trouble. Buster follows Will upstairs, curling up on his bed as Will gets ready to sleep. He brushes his teeth and washes his face, already endeavoring to put the day's events out of his mind. It's nothing important, he reminds himself, just something annoying to deal with. He curls up in bed, wrapping his legs around Buster and drawing the blankets over his face.

By the next morning, he has already forgotten everything.

## II

**October 5, 2021**

Breakfast in the Lecter household is always a treat. With Hannibal's cooking, Chiyoh's journaling, and their combined silence, Hannibal is able to calm his breathing after a nightmare (or seven) and reduce the tremors in his body by at least half. Chiyoh is a sweetheart, really--she never complains about his waking her up while deep in the throes of a nightmare, even though she must be exhausted. For that, Hannibal holds her in very high esteem.

It helps that she's the only person he can bring himself to talk to. It also helps that she translates for him in their shared classes.

He speaks French, of course. He's in his *terminale* year, he studies French literature, he can speak French with the best of them; he just prefers not to speak at all. Hannibal plates his quiche Lorraine with ease, cutting a slice for himself and for Chiyoh. She gives him a nod as she takes it, flashing him a quick, "Good morning," in their shared Russian Sign. He offers her a quick smile in return.

He gets dressed with care, slicking his hair into place and straightening the collar of his shirt. His school has a uniform, just like every good private school. That's one thing Robertas Lecter has done for him: given him a good school to go to, and a good friend to join him. It almost makes up for the years Hannibal spent alone.

As the two of them pile onto the train, Chiyoh stands next to him, helping him to block out the noise of the people around them. They get to school earlier than usual, and make their way to their classroom together.

Hannibal knows that, one day, Chiyoh will find out what he really is. She will find out why he left for a month following his adoption by his Uncle. She will leave him. *This is a very old story. There is no other version of this story.* Still, he hopes that she can understand why he had to kill the men who took everything from him.

He also knows that this will not happen today. With a deep breath, Hannibal Lecter takes a pen from his school bag. He turns in his homework to the tray. He lets nothing show.

One of his classmates attempts to greet him; a rude boy, one whose name he does not know. Hannibal despises him. He's a sycophant, a flatterer, and Hannibal can't stand how he pouts when he doesn't get his way. He's a rich boy who has wanted for nothing and still begs for more. Hannibal has been wealthy all his life, until the night when he lost everything, and he has never been so spoiled.

Hannibal takes his seat.

After a long day, Hannibal always enjoys studying in the library near his and Chiyoh's apartment. His uncle has set the two of them up in a very nice area. There are museums just

around the corner, and a luxurious city library on the next block. He sits in the library, thinking over the day. Chiyoh sits across from him, ever-present, a comforting weight that he will never admit to.

"What are you reading?" he signs, tapping the table to catch her attention. She smiles.

"About psychology," she replies, keeping her voice low. They are in a library, after all. "The mechanisms of memory."

"Is it fascinating?" Hannibal has always loved the arts. In his life, they have been an escape; they keep him sane. He wonders about the human mind, but he has all the time in the world to figure it all out. He is young. He is a survivor. He is never going to die. "Is memory the study of the week?"

"Yes." Chiyoh nods. Her fleeting passions for all sorts of different fields serve her well in secondary school, but Hannibal doubts her ability to settle down in the future. Still, her determination to learn makes Hannibal chuckle. She is an intelligent young woman.

Hannibal thinks back to his English class from earlier in the day. Will Graham, with his stunning blue eyes, has stayed with him for better or for worse. Hannibal would have never thought of pen pals on his own; he thinks the idea is a little juvenile, but he also thinks that with such a beautiful person to talk to, it will all work out. He raises his hands, causing Chiyoh to look his way once more. "What do you think of Madame du Maurier's project?"

The beautiful American has been the subject of more than one of their conversations; more than is appropriate, definitely, but Hannibal can't help it. She is much like his aunt, with her learned manner and sophisticated speech, and Hannibal is drawn to her like a thief to money. Chiyoh, predictably, rolls her eyes, but she responds anyway. "I think it will be tedious."

Hannibal hums his agreement, closing his eyes. "It will." With a smile, he added, "but I hope it will be interesting." He watches as Chiyoh stiffens with no small amount of amusement. He knows she knows what he's capable of, if only in the back of her mind. If only subconsciously. She knows. Some of his laughter must show on his face, because she shoots him an icy look.

"I'm sure."

"We cannot control what goes on around us." Hannibal leans back in his chair, offering Chiyoh a crooked grin. "Lighten up, Chiyoh. There's no need to be so grim."

"You can control what goes on," she says quietly. "You can try."

"We all can try. There is no shame in trying to control one's environment."

"Yes."

Hannibal looks back down at his homework. It all seems so dull, now, compared with Bedelia du Maurier, and Will Graham, and even Chiyoh. What's the point of it? Hannibal sets it aside, pulls out his sketchbook, and begins to draw.

**October 11, 2021**

The first letter from their pen pals arrives with a rush. Hannibal resents not being able to initiate contact, but he receives the envelope with grace, waiting until he sits down to rip it apart.

Gently, of course.

He slides his finger under the opening, separating the envelope's flap and drawing out the letter. Hannibal takes a moment to breathe before unfolding the paper, ready to read. After all, he has spent the past week in anticipation, it feels like; the heavy scent of cheap body wash hits his nose, making him frown.

Chiyoh is looking at him, he realizes, and he glances up to meet her gaze. In her hands is a letter in hastily scrawled French, from a girl who looks too lower-class to be writing in it. But French is a language for all, and so Hannibal keeps an open mind as he holds a hand out, curious, sharing a smile with Chiyoh like an inside joke.

*Dear Chiyoh Murasaki*, begins the note, and Hannibal snorts through his nose. Chiyoh had taken his aunt's last name as a symbol of fealty rarely practiced. Others might say Chiyoh had been adopted by the woman, but Hannibal would disagree, even though that was legally the case. Regardless, the vision of Chiyoh opening this letter to be met with the surname of the woman whose family she served was an amusing one.

*Dear Chiyoh Murasaki,*

*Hello! I'm Beverly Katz. I go to high school in Baltimore, Maryland, with a lot of my friends. I hope you have a lot of friends, because you're really pretty, and you should have a lot of friends. Unless you don't want friends, and then I hope you don't have a lot of them.*

*What do you do for fun? I like to watch anime with my friend Will, because he's at my house a lot. I read science fiction novels and yell at them, and I also read fantasy novels like the Dragonlance Chronicles or the Game of Thrones series. They have a lot of politics in them, which I like.*

That's where Hannibal stops reading, though he does give the rest of the letter a glance. Nothing interesting, he surmises, and he passes it back to Chiyoh with a brush of their hands. It serves to soothe him as he turns his eyes to his own letter.

*Hannibal Lecter*, it begins, and Hannibal winces at the lack of formality. Would it be so much to ask, for a *dear* or a *salutations*? His Will Graham is certainly less than formal, however, with his *tu* usage. Hannibal wishes he would have a little more courtesy; he does so dislike the rude. He supposes he can forgive a student.

It doesn't escape his notice how he's already thinking of this beautiful boy as *his*.

Hannibal leaves class that day with the letter in his mind, filling his thoughts. The cheap body wash, the messy writing, the lackadaisical phrasing, they all suggest a certain *laissez-faire* attitude. A typical young man, one who doesn't care for himself as he should (as Hannibal does), one who spends his time messing around and playing video games. Yet, the mention of him in Chiyoh's letter makes Hannibal wonder how much sway he has with the women in his life.

In short, he's something new to unravel, and Hannibal does so enjoy picking at threads.

Hannibal works on his homework for a few hours at home, writing essays and answering questions with care. Chiyoh ends up ordering food in; Hannibal doesn't like take-out, but he doesn't feel like cooking, so they pick off a plate together. Madame du Maurier's only homework for her English class is to write a letter back for their pen pals, so Hannibal tackles that task with the same esoteric focus as his other assignments.

*Dear Mr. Will Graham,*

*Thank you for your initial letter. I can assure you, however, that I do not kick puppies. Thank you for your compliments, as well; I have never quite been told that my smile is "pretty." Seeing as all you have provided me to work with is your experience with automobiles, I would like to assure you that, should you ever travel to Europe, it will not be necessary to know much about cars.*

*Most of the infrastructure in France is based around public transport. You'll be disappointed to note that the roads are often crowded. In my home city of Paris, the buildings are much too old to attempt to widen streets. Fear not; I'm sure you'd be able to walk the streets of Europe with no problems.*

*Do you have much knowledge of history? It is a subject that endlessly fascinates a close friend and myself. I think, if you knew of it as I do, you would find it interesting as well.*

*Cordially,*

*Hannibal Lecter*

**October 18, 2021**

*Hannibal Lecter*, begins the next letter, and Hannibal can't help but scoff at the continued cheek. For that's what it is, now, he realizes; Will Graham, by his own admission, "couldn't care less" about the rules of propriety.

*Please don't call me Mr. Will Graham. It makes me sound like my father. Just Will is fine. And I don't really like cars all that much, I just wanted something to talk about. I'm sure you know the feeling.*

*I'm not really into history. I have to take world history for school. It's not very interesting. At least, I'm not very interested in it. Lots of wars, diseases, famines, the usual. Humans never*

*change, really.*

*You have nice handwriting. I'd guess you're a neat freak. I'm the total opposite. Nothing like good old dichotomies, am I right?*

*Will Graham*

Yes, Hannibal thinks, raising his pen to write a reply, this boy is certainly a piece of work. Madame du Maurier gives him one of her inscrutable looks as he structures his thoughts; he doesn't miss it. Though he appears absorbed in his work, he is anything but. His teacher has demanded a reply by the end of the day so she can mail them all at once, and Hannibal works quickly, leaving nothing out.

*Dear Will,*

*If you are to be Will, then I insist you call me Hannibal. You need not worry. I don't bite the hand that entertains, after all. So long as you continue to do so, I will have no complaints.*

*History is not a domain for the faint of heart, he writes, disappointment seeping into every stroke. Human history is riddled with significant events turned insignificant by the sheer number of them. Are you a man of the arts, or one of science? I can respect equally both dimensions, though I prefer the arts. History teeters on the line between the two, I find, with the study of it being so diluted. In the modern era it is a miracle to make new historical discoveries; there are only so many times a single event can be retold.*

*Dichotomies do not bother me. They are necessary to maintain the balance of world events. Light and darkness, madness and sanity. The lines blur between them more often than not. I respect their differences as well as their similarities.*

*Are you familiar with the works of Robert Frost? I quite like poetry, and I hear that he is taught in American classrooms. I believe you would like a particular work of his: Fire and Ice, for your fascination with dichotomies.*

*Good luck in your research. Please try not to use Google Translate in your next correspondence.*

*Cordially,*

*Hannibal Lecter*

Hannibal gives Madame du Maurier his letter at the end of class, hoping beyond all hope that she doesn't read it. He doesn't know why the sudden need for privacy, but he has a feeling he'd be hopelessly lost if those blue eyes stared at him in person.

Hannibal is grateful for the distance between them. Even in his writing, Will Graham manages to leave an impression. Maybe it's just because Hannibal is hurting for purpose, but Will takes over his thoughts, overrides his senses, until he's sitting up in the middle of the night because blue eyes and an imagined voice have chased him through his nightmares.

Hannibal cooks breakfast for dinner, wondering about his future. He has already pretty much decided to go to arts school and try to make it as a painter, but Chiyoh's ongoing fascination with psychology draws him in. He'd like to take a chunk out of the human mind; to chew figuratively what he has only chewed literally.

After all, Mischa's wound festers in his heart. Maybe medicine would be interesting.

Hannibal has always been motivated by intrigue. His classes, his art, his friendships, they all remain focused around his interest in something or someone. He thinks of cracking the mysteries of anatomy, physiology, of the human body as a whole, and he likes the picture his mind paints. Unfortunately, medical school costs money. Fortunately (for him, at least), he comes from wealth.

Hannibal wonders if Simonetta Lecter would approve of him going into medicine. He knows his father definitely would prefer it to the arts, but his mother had always been softer, more rounded around the edges. He wonders if it matters, that they would disagree over his future. He decides to pursue it, if only as a way to sew up the gaping hole his sister left behind.

"Let's go to Italy this weekend," he signs to Chiyoh. "I'll make arrangements."

She only nods in response.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

thank you all for sticking around!! i really appreciate it :)

**October 25, 2021**

*Step, two, three, four. Step, two, three, four.* Will counts the steps from the train station to his house with a slowly mounting sense of dread. It had been such a good day, he realizes with a sense of disappointment, that he hadn't expected it to end well anyway.

For once, he doesn't have an excuse to stay after. Beverly has a doctor's appointment. There's nothing going on that he needs to be at drill practice for. He doesn't have a saving grace. Not today.

No time to think about that now. *Step, two, three, four.*

Will hears Buster yapping at the door as he slides his key into the lock. Great. Thanks, Buster. You just had to go and alert the whole house, he thinks, a frown marring his delicate features. Too late, Will realizes that Beverly's loaned lip gloss and eyeliner haven't worn off. As his father opens the door, he's desperately trying to scrub it away.

Oops.

"What the hell is that, boy?"

Fuck.

"Nothin', Dad," Will mumbles, trying to placate his (already drunk; really? It's five) father. "My friend made me put it on."

"Yeah? Well, I won't have it. Not under my roof." His father cuffs him over the head, making Will flinch and stumble into the door frame. "The fuck are you flinching for? Go take that shit off."

Will nods, honestly just grateful to be getting away, and rushes up to his room, Buster hot on his heels. He tosses his backpack on his bed and shuffles into the upstairs bathroom, washing the eyeliner off. He mourns its loss.

He kind of liked it. It made him feel pretty.

No time to think about that now, though.

Will slides downstairs to do the dishes and pick up the kitchen a little, dejectedly realizing that he would have to go upstairs *again* to grab his things... and then back downstairs in order to do his homework outside like he wanted. Oh, well. The exercise is good for him, he muses, and at least he'll go to bed on time.

His homework is boring and tedious, as usual, but it's always nice to get outside some. Buster rolls happily in the grass beside him; for about half an hour, Will gets distracted playing with him. In his defense, he's such a fun, playful dog. It's impossible to not give him some love sometimes.

Will finishes his homework. He thinks he should probably study.

No time to think about that now, though.

No time...

When Will Graham comes to, it's well past dark and the shadows around him are dancing in very strange ways. The shadows have antlers. Is that a deer? No, it's a shadow.

It reminds him of his pen pal.

Buster is whining in the grass next to him. "What's wrong, boy?" he murmurs, stroking Buster's spine. "Too cold? Let's go inside."

His folder is sitting in front of him, all the papers inside neat and tidy. That isn't like him at all. Will gets up to go inside, cringing at the thought of the yelling he'll have to endure if his father is awake.

Luckily, he isn't. Will yawns, feeding Buster before retiring upstairs. A shadow moves from the corner of his eye.

No time to think about that, though.

## **October 26, 2021**

Morning chemistry classes are the fucking worst.

Will tosses back the rest of his coffee (thank you, Beverly, you're a godsend) and turns back to his lab table, blankly staring at Zeller. He just asked a question. Will has no idea what he asked.

Eloquently, Will says, "What?"

"Did you get the color for the KCl?" Zeller's tone is one of exaggerated patience; he's clearly been waiting for a while. Oops.

"No, I didn't." Will looks over at Margot's paper, decidedly ignoring her, and copies down the word *purple*. It was a pretty flame, too, burning lavender and shimmering in the harsh LED

light. "Purple," he repeats, then again, liking the way the word feels in his mouth.

Zeller, used to his idiosyncrasies by now, simply snorts. Margot, however, gives him a sideways glance. Her hair is pulled back; he idly notes the color (a beautiful auburn) and the shape of her collarbones (pointy, as always, but not in a bad way). "You've been spacing out." She raises an eyebrow, clearly wondering why.

Unfortunately, though, Will didn't exactly intend to tell her. "Yeah. It's eight in the morning," he says, shaking his head. "I'm tired."

"I'm sure." Margot is clearly unconvinced, but she at least shuts her mouth. Good. Will raises a hand to his forehead, rubbing his temples. He can already feel a migraine coming on. He notes the color of another burning chemical, leaning over to copy Zeller's rationales. "If you need to talk..."

"You're here," Will snaps, waving her off with a hand. "I get it." His drawl comes out in this, piercing the still air of the chemistry 'laboratory.' Margot leans back; Zeller doesn't even seem to notice. Good.

Maybe now he can question what the *fuck* Hannibal Lecter is thinking.

His brain has been melting, he thinks, with these thoughts. He's too busy focusing on his pen pal. Where did he get off in his high-and-mighty mind?

He did, Will thinks, because now here he was, sitting and thinking about his enigmatic smile and his stupid beady eyes. He sighs, and mentally begins drafting a reply.

**October 27, 2021**

*Nibbles,*

*You certainly have a lot of nerve, accusing me of using Google. You're correct, but you have a lot of nerve in saying it.*

*On dichotomies, I say they are important for humans. I don't have fear of contradictions. I think contradictions are good and healthy in humans. Again, though, I don't care much for them. I just wanted something to say. Like cars.*

*Something I do care for, though: dystopian novels. I like reading classical dystopian novels, especially Fahrenheit 451, over and over again. I enjoy comparing the views of society from that time to our views of society today. I guess it's a dichotomy. I don't really know.*

*I do think military history is interesting. That's the stereotype, I think. Autistic white boy likes military history! Nobody is surprised. But it's still fun to learn about where people go wrong. Ancient Greek and Roman battles, in particular, interest me. Caligula--little boot, wanted to fill his father's shoes but couldn't. And commanding his soldiers to fight the sea. There's a metaphor in there somewhere--find it, would you? Thanks.*

*My Instagram is @willyg3848, if you're interested.*

*Will Graham*

Will sighs and leans back, glancing around the classroom. He didn't expect to finish so early, but he did--to be fair, he had already planned most of it--and now he had an entire hour of free time. Will closes his eyes, tilting his chair to the balance point. There's an art to it, see, where one keeps their mass right at the balance point. Sophomore year physics had taught him that much.

He opens his eyes after a moment, clinging to a wisp of a thought which had befallen him. Maybe he could send Hannibal something else in the letter. Will reaches for a pen, grabs a piece of paper from his bag, and sets on drawing something.

Which... he immediately forgets about. He remembers his algebra homework, due the next period (and completely blown off), and pulls that out to work on it instead. And when the hour is up, all he's left with is a scrap sheet of paper. He takes one look at his equations, then shrugs and folds them up. He doesn't need them, the teacher rarely checks for work. He can send them. That's fine.

It might give Hannibal ideas, but at least it's something to talk about.

### **October 31, 2021**

Will wakes up extra early the morning of Halloween, texting Beverly as soon as the sun rises. *Wake up! I'm driving over.* Technically, he doesn't have his official license, but what is his dad going to do? They look remarkably similar, and it wasn't like his dad had any plans--he checked. "See ya, dad," he calls, waving over his shoulder. His father grunts something vaguely like *have fun* in reply.

Will rolls up on Beverly's house near midmorning, banging on her first-floor window until she opens it and yells at him. Worth it, he thinks, giving her a grin. He's been surprisingly cheerful recently, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out why. He made a new friend. He thinks.

When he gets inside, he's immediately directed to Beverly's makeup and told to have fun with a wave of the hand in his direction. "Works for me," he snipes, before getting to work on his eyeliner. It takes him thirty minutes to figure out the wings, but he does, eventually, and pulls the dress he and Beverly had picked out from the closet.

"Are you sure?"

"Babe, you're going to look so good."

Will glances between her and the plain black ensemble. It was beautiful, really, with a sweetheart neckline and a-line skirt (not that Will, of course, knows these terms. He's a manly man. ...Sometimes), and it made him feel like a princess, but he just wasn't sure about wearing it.

"You can wear it if you want to," she says with a soft smile. "Or not wear it."

"I don't think I want to," he confesses, the words escaping him in a rush. "I don't think I'm ready."

"That's fine." Beverly hums. "Can I style your hair?"

"...Yeah." Will gives her a shy grin. It's nice to have supportive friends.

"Wonderful, dah-ling," she drawls, tugging playfully at one of his curls. "I'm gonna make you a star."

The day passes in a blur--haunted houses, a scary movie, and a bit of trickery involving leaving candy on the neighbors' porches. Will doesn't register the actions of their group much more than *I'm talking and having fun*. He smiles so much that, by the time he gets back to Beverly's house, his cheeks are in pain, and he just barely tunes into what she's saying.

Beverly is losing her mind, and Will can't even really blame her.

"Did you *see* Alana? Oh, she's just--" She presses her fingers to her lips, then extends them outwards in a chef's kiss. "Delicious. Perfection."

"Oh, please." Will rolls his eyes, throwing a pillow square at her face and ignoring her squeak. "You only say that 'cause she was making eyes at you all night."

"Hey, hey! I want to get some," Beverly complains. "My dick hasn't been wet since August, Will. *August!* I deserve it." She looks up, and Will flinches. "Hey, you still like me, right?"

That was... a low blow. He had confessed feelings to her about a year previously, as part of an ongoing game in which Will's stupid brain decided to have feelings for literally all of his friends. She had been cool about it at the time. Now, she was looking at him with some sort of interest. Her gaze sends a shiver up Will's spine.

"No," he says, turning his eyes away. He can see her deflate out of the corner of his eye; he hopes she knows that she fucked up. "I think it's probably time for me to start heading home."

After the day's Halloween festivities, he's pretty tired, anyway. It's only five. He shoulders his bag, stuffed full with the dress (in a wrinkled heap by now, for sure), and stands.

"Will..."

"We're both pretty tired." He wants to make an excuse for her bringing up his feelings, but he also just wants to go home. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Beverly's face falls. "Yeah. See you tomorrow."

"Okay."

Most of the drive home is silent; Will's stomach is turning over and over, rolling up into a ball and twisting into knots. This always happens, he muses. He *always* gets crushed on his friends. It's a bit of a joke, though he doesn't exactly find it funny. Price and Zeller both are cute, in their own ways, and once upon a time he had a thing for Margot. He just thought that

it would be better with Beverly. Maybe she would understand a bit better, that that was just his sexuality, he couldn't control it and didn't want to do anything about it. He sighs. At least he knows better.

She's fine with everything else, it seems, but not with that, he thinks bitterly. And why would she be? He had basically professed his love for her and then said *actually, I want to remain friends*. And she had seemed to agree. Maybe she didn't. Maybe she was just waiting for the right moment. Will doesn't want her in a romantic context. He doesn't want to see her that way.

Maybe I'm overthinking this, he adds, turning on the radio. It's not that big of a deal. *I just made a big deal out of it. It wasn't a big deal, but I made it into one.* Maybe, he muses, I just need some sleep.

## November 10, 2021

His response is there quickly enough, along with a short and sweet footnote: *I have created an Instagram account just for you, Will. The handle is @hannibal.lecter.* Will smiles without knowing why (he does, he just doesn't want to admit it) and looks up as Mr. Crawford addresses the class. Beverly is laughing. Why is she laughing? Oh.

"A little enthusiastic, aren't you, Will?" Mr. Crawford's eyes are twinkling, but his lips are pulled into a stern frown. "And here I thought that you were opposed to this project."

Will huffs, tossing the letter on the table. "Doesn't matter anyway." He rolls his eyes, leaning back in his chair.

He's wearing a new lip gloss, and that's what's making him so sassy, he thinks. It's something about the makeup. Perhaps that's why girls are always so pissy? They have to keep reapplying lip gloss. That makes sense to him, so he internalizes it. Mr. Crawford finishes his lecture and pointedly turns to him. "I suppose you can open your letters now." Will makes a point of picking his paper back up.

*Dear Will,*

*Your nickname for me is utterly appalling and I humbly request that you retire it at once. If not, I will be forced to come up with something so heinous that my mother would quake in her grave.*

*On dystopias: I quite enjoy a good dystopian novel. My favorites, however, tend to be much more bleak than usual. 1984, for example. I find something so chilling in the fact that a strong, resolute man could be broken down and forced to renounce his love. I'm something of a romantic, so I feel an attachment to the idea of the love in the book. In the end, the only love he has is for Big Brother.*

*Pivoting subjects, however, I would like to ask about your experience in the American educational system. I am considering attending Johns Hopkins University for college, as they have offered me quite a substantial scholarship and the promise of a visa. What would you*

*say about your high school experience? If you know of anything about college "across the water," as they say, please share it with me at your earliest convenience.*

*I would say that your comment about Caligula draws parallels to society today, where the powers that be are constantly trying to keep the unknown at bay. Caligula was afraid of the sea; why else would he fight it? In the same vein, social change is a terrifying and unknown thing. In France, homosexuality has been legal since the revolution. In America, only since the 1950s. France legalized same-sex marriage before the United States as well. Caligula was also part of a line of emperors notorious for their homosexual activities--a subject over which classicists argue themselves hoarse.*

*I have created an Instagram account just for you, Will. The handle is @hannibal.lecter.*

*Yours,*

*Hannibal*

## IV

### Chapter Summary

i may or may not update this quickly next time but don't worry i DO intend to update!  
thanks for your support :)

#### November 13, 2021

Hannibal had been dragging Chiyoh to various places for the weekend, and it seemed she was getting sick of it, so Hannibal had decided to strike out on his own.

People around him tended to say that the Musee de Louvre took sixty-five days to view in its entirety. Hannibal just liked to sketch the paintings of women, so it didn't take him long at all to get to his favorite bench.

The Louvre had been a bit of a home away from home, he muses, during the latter half of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not that it was over, but it certainly had died down, especially in France. So as he sat, directly in front of Diana the Huntress, he smiled.

He hadn't been doing a lot of that recently. He had never done much of it. Hannibal was always a grim child, even before the tragedy that took his family from him, and he never thought he had much reason to smile.

He was, however, (as a kid might say) down bad.

Hannibal's pencil touches the paper of his sketchpad for just a moment, before the spark of inspiration to draw Diana fades. He doesn't want to draw her, beautiful though she is. He's a little bored of drawing women, if he wants to be completely honest with himself. He pulls out his phone to see a notification from his new friend.

***Graham Cracker:*** Hey, Hannibal. What are you doing today?

Hannibal smiles a little brighter, then sets down his pencil to type a response.

***Hannibal :*** I am visiting a local museum. And yourself?

***Graham Cracker:*** Attending JROTC practice.

Ah, yes, JROTC. A confusing way to get young children to join the military. Hannibal chuckles, a bit of inspiration hitting him.

***Hannibal :*** Are you wearing your JROTC uniform?

***Graham Cracker: Yeah***

***Hannibal: Would you send me a picture?***

***Graham Cracker: What?***

The response is immediate, and forces a laugh from Hannibal's belly.

***Hannibal: Would you send me a picture of you, wearing the uniform?***

***Graham Cracker: Sure, I guess.***

***Hannibal: Thank you.***

The picture comes through. Hannibal sighs with a strange combination of pleasure and pain. Will is *gorgeous* , really. Another picture, however, halts him in his tracks.

***Graham Cracker: I like this one better.***

What was his beautiful boy thinking, sending such a thing? It should be classed as obscene, Hannibal thinks, admiring the neckline of the dress Will is wearing. It's an awkward picture of him in the mirror, holding tightly to the hem of the skirt, and Hannibal is absolutely smitten. He has to type three, four, five different messages, before finally settling on something simple. Doubtless Will has already understood Hannibal's speechlessness, but it doesn't seem to be something he'll worry about.

***Hannibal: You look good.***

***Graham Cracker: Should I delete it? It's kind of silly.***

***Graham Cracker: Sorry***

***Hannibal: No, you look wonderful.***

***Graham Cracker: Really?***

***Hannibal: Yes.***

***Graham Cracker: I want to wear something like this to school***

***Graham Cracker: My dad would kill me, though.***

***Hannibal : Bring a change of clothes.***

***Graham Cracker: I'm scared other people would make fun of me. Or like. Tell him.***

***Hannibal: If you want to wear it, then wear it. I, for one, would be surprised if every student in your school did not drop their jaws upon seeing you.***

***Graham Cracker: .***

***Graham Cracker:*** *You're a charmer*

***Hannibal:*** *I try.*

Hannibal's pencil finds its first awkward stroke, though his eyes are caught between searching for another text and the picture he had opened. The figure comes easily; he has drawn plenty of male forms in his life. "Oh, Will," he breathes, cutting his gaze firmly towards his sketchbook.

The next message takes him off guard.

***Graham Cracker:*** *I'm glad you're my friend.*

Friend.

The word is something that Hannibal knows, of course. He has even applied it to Will himself. But to hear Will state something so openly, something like *friends*, feels divine. Hannibal has the urge to attend a service for the first time in years, just to feel that same sacred love. He doesn't, of course; he has no place in the Jewish community. But he wants to.

***Hannibal :*** *And I, you. You're a lovely friend.*

***Graham Cracker:*** *Thanks :)*

The conversation ends there, because how could it not? Hannibal feels supremely awkward returning the sentiment. He feels as if he has overstepped his bounds, somehow--by approaching someone so *holy*, so otherworldly, he feels inadequate. He certainly doesn't like feeling that way.

He wants to stop talking to Will. He doesn't want to feel inadequate. He can't make himself hit the block button.

**November 18, 2021**

It is when he receives his next letter that Hannibal realizes Will isn't going anywhere. Hannibal won't let him.

*Nibbles*, it begins, and Hannibal is simultaneously endeared and disgusted by his friend's informal French.

*Nibbles*,

*I guess that's a good metaphor. You're better at this than I give you credit for. I just tend to ramble, so it's cool to see that you actually can make something out of nothing.*

*School here kind of sucks. It's always just a little too hot or a little too cold in the classrooms. The teachers don't really give a shit. I guess something like Johns Hopkins would presumably*

*be better. It's not an Ivy League, but it's still a pretty good school. I'm sure you'd be fine, you seem like a high achiever.*

*What do you even want to study? I know Johns Hopkins is known for medicine, but you seem more like an art student. You like poetry, you have nice handwriting, I bet you exclusively listen to classical music. What kind of music do you like, anyway? I tend to prefer American alternative. Rock. Early 2000's rock. Whatever is playing on the local stations, at least. Do you listen to any bands?*

*I actually don't know what I want to do with my life, and that's a little scary. Maybe forensics? I like puzzles and patterns, and I have a weird thing with people. I think it would be nice to understand a bit more. To be honest, though, I'm not even sure if I want to go to college. I have a cushy job fixing up boat motors set out for me. I'm good at it. I'm just not sure that I want to do that with my life.*

*I don't know. It's a long process. I kind of envy people who are sure of themselves.*

*Will*

Hannibal snorts, drawing surprised looks from his peers. He never smiles; he doesn't talk, either, though that is more easily explainable. Laughing, however? It was completely off the table. Madame du Maurier gives him a stare, long and hard and completely confusing.

She reminds him of his aunt, and that scares the hell out of him.

Hannibal wasn't exactly the biggest fan of Lady Murasaki. She was nice, sure, but the things she asked him to do... he shudders even contemplating it. He's certainly not excited to go home to his aunt and uncle for the winter holiday. He hears they're planning on visiting him and Chiyoh for the days of Hanukkah, and doubtless she will ask him to retreat with her to a private place.

He loves her and hates her in equal measure, that's for sure.

Putting thoughts of his aunt out of his mind, Hannibal raises his pen to scribe a letter in return.

*Snickerdoodle,*

*Please don't ask the rationale for this title, as my thought process behind it is a blemish on my conscience. I enjoy finding meaning in the little things, perhaps too much.*

*As for what I desire to study, in terms of passion it is human psychology. However, I do intend to go into the medical field. I enjoy a good field dissection, and it is more than amenable to me to be the one performing a surgery. The art of cutting someone open and stitching back up speaks to me on a primal level.*

*I would hope Johns Hopkins is much better than average. It is extremely expensive, after all. How do Americans afford college? Your education system is a joke, and yet you pay hundreds of thousands of dollars. They offered to subsidize my tuition; they seem to be quite interested*

*in me. If not, I have contingency plans in England. English colleges have wonderful education, a lovely history, and are much, much cheaper than American ones.*

*If you would not like to go to college, I recommend building a set of skills now. For me, art (see attached), but music as well. I play the harpsichord. I highly recommend it; it's a wonderful instrument.*

*I have noticed, in rereading past letters, that I tend to enjoy the semicolon. It's such a useful thing. It connects two sentences together without the need for the repetitiveness of smaller sentences, I believe. The semicolon is, I think, my favorite part of the English grammar. You, and your math, seems to be very suited for engineering work, should you choose to accept. I imagine you would have quite an easy time in forensics, however. Have you ever looked into forensic entomology? I don't know why, but it seems right up your alley.*

*P.S. I have attached for you a little gift. I may decide to send more; please send me your address, so I may address packages to you.*

*Yours,*

*Hannibal*

Hannibal sets his pencil down, looking to Chiyoh, then out of the window. He folds his drawing into a flower, surrounding it with the letter, and seals both in the envelope to hand to Madame du Maurier.

"See me after class," she breathes, her voice like nails on chalkboard to his ears. He nods, and reaches for a paper to scrawl an affirmative.

"Good."

It turned out, fortunately, that she most certainly was *not* trying to get in his draws, but was increasingly concerned about the content of his letters. Of course.

"I would advise you not to get too close." She swirls her glass of water around, likely wishing it was wine, and cocks her head. "To someone overseas."

Hannibal writes his snippy reply-- *I wasn't aware you were judging the content of our letters. Only the fluency with which we wrote.* She chuckles.

"Not others', no, but yours. You write well. And it stands out to me, that you are exchanging contact information with this boy."

*Should we not have been friendly?* Hannibal blinks. *I would prefer to be polite.*

"This wasn't just politeness, Hannibal."

*Is that all you had to say?* Hannibal stands, shoving his paper into her hand. *If so, then I will be taking my leave. Good evening.*

Madame du Maurier watches him go with hooded eyes, then tosses back the rest of her water.

**November 28, 2021**

**TW: Implied child sexual abuse**

It was only the first night of Hanukkah, and Hannibal was already stressed.

After lighting the menorah together, Hannibal, his uncle Robertas, the Lady Murasaki, and Chiyoh had gone down to the park at the end of the block for a moonlit stroll. Yet Hannibal couldn't help but stick close to his uncle, in hopes that he would shield Hannibal from his aunt.

It doesn't work. "How is school, Hannibal?" she purrs, and the hair on the back of Hannibal's neck stands up.

He raises his hands to give her an answer, but she gives him a sharp look, and he clears his throat. Once, twice, he tries to open his mouth, but the words don't come. She sighs, piercing the air, and his face falls.

"Of course. Not able to talk to me, still."

"He's trying," says Robertas, waving the Lady off. "There is no shame in being unable to speak." His words say one thing, but his tone--of which Hannibal is acutely aware--says something completely different, and suddenly he's back in the orphanage hearing the children around him mock his loss.

Chiyoh steps up to his other side, for which he is immensely grateful. He looks to her, and she nods. He raises his hands once more.

"Fine, thank you for asking." Chiyoh tries to inject a bit of warmth into her voice, but it falls abruptly short. "I have been progressing quite well in my studies. I get along well with my English teacher, and my art class is as good as ever."

"Lovely." Murasaki leans to look at him, then back to her husband. "Robertas, switch sides with me." He does so, obedient as ever to his tigress, and Hannibal shivers. He decides to try and blame it on the chilly air.

"And you, Chiyoh?" She's evidently not interested in anything Chiyoh has to say, seeing her only as the help, but it's clear that Chiyoh is expected to respond.

Dutifully, she does. "Fine as well, Lady. The maths have not been so hard as to require extra help." Chiyoh clearly isn't used to speaking for herself in front of Murasaki; she has to hunt for those words, deep within the recesses of her consciousness. "And your life, how has it been progressing?"

"Oh, just wonderful, now that you ask." Murasaki smiles. It's sharklike in its anticipation; Hannibal has the distinct feeling of being trapped between her jaws. "I'm *very* excited to be able to spend these nights with the two of you."

Robertas nods. "It's always good to be surrounded by family." He gives a smile almost opposite in its nature, warm and gentle. Hannibal wants to reach out to him for comfort, but he is a stern man when it comes to affection. Hannibal reaches down instead, fumbling for Chiyoh's hand in the dark. She gives him a reassuring squeeze.

"It is," he signs, and Chiyoh translates. "It's much more lively around our little area. Which hotel are you two staying in?"

"You should come by and see it," Murasaki replies, resting a hand on Hannibal's forearm. He fights a flinch. "It's gorgeous. Very large. Our suite has a view of the Seine."

Hannibal nods. He wants to tune her out. He does, after her hand squeezes tighter; he doesn't feel like he's in his body anymore. It doesn't belong to him. He retreats into the comfortable silence of dissociation.

And later that night, Hannibal pulls open Will's messages with shaky fingers. He has just stumbled home, much too early in the morning. He has no hope of sleeping. He types with a heavy heart.

***Hannibal*** : *Are you awake?*

***Graham Cracker***: *Yes*

The response is immediate. It's comforting.

***Hannibal***: *Would you like to talk?*

***Graham Cracker*** : *Sure, what about?*

That was the million dollar question, wasn't it? Hannibal doesn't know what he wants. He just wants to not think about his evening.

***Hannibal*** : *Do you have any music recommendations?*

That's simple, he thinks. Very neutral, and it's sure to get Will typing right away.

***Graham Cracker***: *Yeah, but they're mostly 90's and 00's rock.*

***Hannibal***: *That's alright.*

***Graham Cracker***: *Are you okay?*

Hannibal doesn't want to answer that. He just wants to talk about *something* . Anything else.

***Hannibal***: *Yes. Please.*

***Graham Cracker***: *Ooook*

***Graham Cracker***: *Red hot chili peppers, they have some cool stuff. And the glorious sons*

***Graham Cracker***: *I'll send you one of my favorites*

**Graham Cracker:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUVDmVM9RtA>

**Graham Cracker:** *It's pretty good. Dark, though*

**Hannibal :** *I don't mind darkness.*

**Graham Cracker:** *Are you really okay?*

That gives Hannibal pause. He can't guarantee Will would care. But he did ask, and Hannibal doesn't have an interest in dishonesty.

**Hannibal:** *No.*

**Graham Cracker:** *Do you want to talk about it?*

**Hannibal:** *No.*

**Graham Cracker:** *Okay.*

**Graham Cracker:** *I really like more mellow music, honestly. What kinds of music do you like?*

**Hannibal:** *As you guessed, classical. A favorite is the Aria in G Minor by Bach.*

**Hannibal:** *I have a digital keyboard, which I set to string, in order to mimic the idea of the harpsichord.*

**Graham Cracker:** *Too predictable, Nibbles*

**Hannibal:** *I must insist that you quit calling me that horrible nickname.*

**Graham Cracker:** *What nickname, Nibbles?*

**Hannibal:** *What indeed, sweet cookie.*

**Graham Cracker:** *NOOOOOOOOO*

**Hannibal:** *No what, Snickerdoodle?*

**Graham Cracker:** *PLEASE*

Hannibal's lips quirk into the slightest smile. His not wanting to discuss his hardship was... oddly well-received. Hannibal expected Will to push, but he didn't. A warmth settles in his stomach.

**Hannibal:** *I'm afraid it's much too late.*

**Graham Cracker:** *I'LL STOP I PROMISE*

**Hannibal:** *Suffer your fate.*

***Graham Cracker:*** AHHHHHHHHHHH

***Graham Cracker:*** On another note, though, I really like the drawing you did :)

***Graham Cracker:*** It has taken up residence in my school folder

***Hannibal:*** That's good. I quite enjoyed drawing you. You have a wonderful face.

***Graham Cracker:*** So do you draw Sonic inflation

***Hannibal:*** ?

***Graham Cracker:*** WAIT NO

***Hannibal:*** I have to look something up.

***Graham Cracker:*** HANNIBAL NO

***Hannibal:*** Oh.

***Hannibal:*** I've done worse.

***Graham Cracker:*** WHAT IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN

***Hannibal:*** I'm quite tired.

***Graham Cracker:*** YOU BASTARD

***Hannibal:*** Good night, Will.

***Graham Cracker:*** Good night you two-faced bitch

***Hannibal:*** Rude.

***Graham Cracker:*** Yeah :P love ya

Hannibal can't believe it, so he doesn't. He likes the message and sets his phone on his nightstand. He settles in for a few hours of his brain refusing to go to sleep. He absolutely does *not* think about Will.

He does, though. Perhaps he's just quite friendly. After an hour, Hannibal types a short response. *Ly too*. It's simple. It doesn't need a lot of commitment. Hannibal wonders if this is a trauma bond forming; Chiyoh's readings have rubbed off on him, if he knows this much. He closes his eyes. He doesn't sleep.

He sleeps.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Summary

Hey everyone :) sorry for not updating in a while, I was writing a book lmao  
But I'm back with a lil chapter chapter :3 enjoy

**December 10, 2021**

Getting a pen pal was probably the worst thing that ever happened to Will.

He drums his fingers on the cafeteria table. He can't think of anything but Hannibal; he knows Beverly will be looking on, judging him immensely, and he can't even blame her. He pulls out his phone to check for a text he knows will not be there. The black words on the screen burn into his eyes.

*Hannibal: Good night, Will.*

That was four hours ago. He didn't mind. Hannibal needed his sleep. But... still. He looks up at his best friend with a gaze best described as that of Buster when denied a treat. She laughs in response.

"Willy, you're totally simping."

"I am *not*," he whines, putting his head down on his arms. "I just like talking to him."

"Y'know, there's a stereotype for lesbians that, like, we all have to have at least one long-distance relationship."

"I don't like him like that!" Will frowns. "We're just good friends, okay?"

"Okay, okay." Beverly chuckles, and Will blushes--he just wanted to look sadly at his phone, was that so much to ask? He tugged at his flannel, pulling the collar away from his neck. "Put your phone away," she said, "and tell Zeller he's being stupid."

"What?!" Zeller's outrage causes Will to sit up and put his phone away, just as instructed, to try and pay attention to his words. To tell the truth, it still doesn't work.

Things had been... awkward, somehow, with Beverly. He loved her, but her Halloween gag still broiled within him. He didn't like it. *Hey, you still like me, right?* Her callous words bounce around the walls of his skull with impudence.

In contrast, however, Hannibal had been nothing but kind. He was sweet, and understanding, and honest to a point--and, more than anything, Will felt *seen*. Hannibal's drawings had only

increased in frequency--every day, now, Will found himself bombarded with a pencil sketch of his own face. He hadn't been idle, either; Will's fingers hurt from all the knot-tying he had been doing. On his wrists sat countless friendship bracelets in fun patterns. He didn't know which one he wanted to send to Hannibal, yet.

When they finally get to their French class, Will takes his seat, still lost in thought. His eyes glaze over as Mr. Crawford starts talking. He could faintly hear something about the environment (like they had been doing for the past month), something-something-biotechnology and all. Will didn't know. And when an assignment was placed in front of him, he sets to it with the same ethic he always does: asking Dr. Google for the answers.

"Hey, Will."

Beverly's voice snaps him out of his trance. Will looks up at her, tilting his head and blinking a few times.

"You're doing the dissociating thing again," she whispers, too loud for comfort. Will glances around; she lowers her voice even further. "Y'know, where you space out. You're not lookin' too good."

"I always look good," he protests, shaking his head. "I've been doing a bit better."

"Don't lie to me." Beverly rolls her eyes. "There's something in your thick skull. Is it really just moon eyes over Mr. Cheekbones, or is it, like, something else?"

Will bites his lip. He wants to tell her, to get the burden of being alone off of his chest and confess that *her* words were what kept him quiet. But he's not brave enough. So, instead, he says, "I'll tell you after class." He finishes his assignment with Google's help. He checks his phone, then puts his head back in his hands.

"Will." Beverly's voice is urgent, now; she pokes his arm, making him glare up at her. "You haven't been coming over quite as often."

"Working," he says, by way of an explanation. "You know how it is with the boats."

"Will." She fixes him with a hard stare. Around them, the buzz of conversation springs up. They hide behind the cacophony wall. Beverly gets a bit louder. "You're not acting normal."

"When am I ever?"

"Just *answer* me, Will!"

"Fine!" He sits up; the class quiets. He doesn't even notice. "You said some shit to me on Halloween and I'm still salty about it! I don't know what the hell you meant by that, and I don't know why you would say that to me, and I have *no clue* why you would ask me if I liked you after you mentioned not having sex in a while! And I don't want to talk to you right now because you asked that!" Beverly's face is as white as a sheet; Will can feel the heat in his own cheeks, but can't stop himself from speaking. "Are you happy?"

She doesn't say anything. Will huffs, then shifts away from her and buries his head back in his arms.

**December 12, 2021**

**TW: References to abuse, homophobia**

*katz the musical: hey, will, can we talk?*

Will swipes the notification away as an identical one pops up from a person he actually wants to talk to.

*Hannibal: Hello, Will.*

*Will: Heyyyyyyyyy*

*Hannibal: How are you?*

Will pauses. Does he want to share? His lips twist into a frown as he remembers Hannibal refusing to share with him--he knows it's childish, and stupid, but he just wanted to help. And so he responds.

*Will: Bad :(*

*Hannibal: Would you like to share?*

It takes Will a while to reply to that. He works on another motor, trading tools with his father as they work. It's one of the only pleasant times Will can experience with his dad--usually, he's too drunk to reason with, but he doesn't get drunk when he works, and they can share a decent conversation with a bit of work.

"How are you?" His father's question is identical to his friend's--it makes Will glance at the table where his phone sits, far away from Will and his greasy hands. "I feel like I hardly see you anymore."

"Good." Will smiles, though it feels like more of a grimace. "I've been really busy with ROTC and stuff."

"Still in that club, huh?" Bill Graham Sr. smiles at this, humming tonelessly. "Makin' your old man proud. Hopefully you go to the Navy, do something a little better than this."

Will's heart aches.

It's hard for Will to hold the two realities in his heart at the same time: that his father loves him, and that he loves his father... and that he can't exactly be himself in his father's presence, or trust him after a beer. It makes Will think of *1984*, and doublethink, and how two plus two is whatever the party thinks it is, and yet still four.

His father did his best, he reasons, late at night when he's trying to sleep. *He does his best for me*. But he can't help comparing himself to Beverly. He wonders why Min-seo Katz is so

loving, and genuine, and honest, and doesn't even drink herself half to death. She doesn't get drunk and beat her daughter. She doesn't forget to feed the dog. She doesn't call her daughter slurs for coming home with makeup on.

Will loves his father. He nods, and they fall silent. It takes a long time before he works up the nerve to talk to his dad again.

"How're the Saints?" His father likes football, especially during the winter months. Virginia gets cold, and they both miss Louisiana's warm winters and hot, humid summers. "They been winning?"

"Next game comes on in a few hours." Bill smiles at him. Will sees himself, sad, hungry, working, forty years in the future, and it scares him. But his father is a good man. "Against the Jets."

"Go Saints," he says, smiling a bit brighter. "No finer team in the United States, huh?"

"We both know that ain't true," his father drawls. Will finds himself laughing, despite all of his doubts. It's not so bad, he thinks, we can get along like this. "But damn if they ain't our home city, hm?"

"Yeah." Will nods. He tightens a bolt.

"Got any, uh, tests this week?" Bless his heart, he's trying so hard.

"Got one in algebra."

"Hell, son, you'll do better than anything I could."

"Heh, I try my best."

"And I'm proud of you." Bill stops working, looking over at his son. "You know that, right?"

Will is silent. "You know that, right," he prods, his blue eyes searching those of his son. They're identical, really, with just more tan lines and dirt and weathering on his father's face. But the curls, the eyes, the nose, the faint facial hair--those are all the same. And Will knows this. He knows that this will be him, one day--miserable, alone, having lost his wife and been left with an ungrateful gay son.

"Yeah," he says, after a minute. "I know."

They work together in silence for a few hours more, before his father goes off to watch the Saints game and Will washes his hands to pick up his phone. He has a few missed texts--another one from Beverly, and a couple from Hannibal. He opens the ones from Hannibal first.

***Hannibal: Will?***

**Hannibal:** *I suppose you're busy.*

**Hannibal:** *If you'd like to talk, my door is open.*

**Hannibal:** *Metaphorically.*

Though Will had resolved himself to ice Hannibal out, the mature part of his brain told him that wasn't fair. And it isn't, Will thinks, to hold it against him. He asked. Hannibal said no. He wasn't slighted, or sent into a depressive episode over Hannibal not wanting to share a nervous experience on day one.

Will types up his response.

**Will:** *On Halloween, my best friend asked me if I still liked her*

**Will:** *She said it was because she was in a dry spell, and then asked me, and it feels super weird to try and talk to her because I just*

**Will:** *I told her I liked her back in like August and then said I wanted to stay friends and she didn't seem to mind at the time so that was great*

**Will:** *And I just keep doing this, I develop crushes on people I don't want to be romantic with and it's like every single one of my friends at this point lmao*

**Will:** *Idk it feels weird for her to bring that up. Like a low blow yknow*

Will watches the typing bubble pop up and turns off his phone screen. After a kitchen-cleaning adventure and a walk with Buster, he checks again.

**Hannibal:** *I understand. Have you talked to her about it?*

**Will:** *No*

**Hannibal:** *You probably should. Friends are a precious thing.*

**Will:** *I have others.*

**Hannibal:** *Do you?*

Will frowns. He doesn't have an answer to that, and so he doesn't bother.

**December 13, 2021**

Beverly doesn't pick him up. He isn't surprised.

Will takes the rail to get into Baltimore, and walks to an apartment complex close by. This is what he had to do before he met Beverly--he had to get up balls-ass early, and fool the bus driver into thinking he lived where he said he lived, and ride the bus with all its noise and weird smells and flashing lights. He had to walk into the school alone, and awkwardly return some waves, and walk into chemistry and lie about paying attention. It wasn't easy. It still

isn't, though he has grown plenty since then, and he heads inside with a heavy heart. He pulls out his phone.

**katz the musical:** *hey, will, can we talk?*

**Will:** *Hey, sorry for not responding*

**katz the musical:** *:/ you're only sorry cause we didn't pick you up this morning*

**Will:** *I figured out what I would lose if I just ghosted you altogether, lol*

**Will:** *Good company*

**Will:** *I'm really sorry for blowing up at you*

**Will:** *It wasn't even your fault cause you apologized and everything*

**Will:** *I just felt really self conscious and*

**Will:** *Idk*

**Will:** *I'm sorry.*

He puts his phone away for a while, deciding to try and focus on his actual schoolwork. Novel, he knows, but it's important. He catches up on some late work for history, works on a car in auto tech, and goes home in the same convoluted way he first arrived at school. When he finally checks his messages again, there's a reply waiting. He holds his breath.

**katz the musical:** *i mean it's not even that bad i just don't know why you didn't like tell me*

**katz the musical:** *it was a weirdo comment and im sorry for making it, it was an impulse and it was rly shitty of me lol*

**katz the musical:** *so im sorry for that and if you can forgive me then i can forgive you*

Will lets out the breath he had been holding. It was fine. He could be friends with Beverly, still. Truthfully, Will didn't know what he would do if he lost her.

**Will:** *Yeah*

**Will:** *I'm just glad I got to say all of that tbh*

**Will:** *It had really been on my mind... sorry it was so explosive*

**katz the musical:** *you know you can like talk to me right*

**katz the musical:** *sorry if it was like weird after august or w/e, i was trying to process everything you told me but like. i don't blame you i'm fabulous*

**katz the musical:** *it was meant to be a silly little joke but i can see it made things hella weird*

***katz the musical:*** *cause like im a lesbian*

***Will:*** *Yeah*

***Will:*** *Tbh I don't really*

***Will:*** *Think I like Alana like that*

***Will:*** *I might be gay*

***Will:*** *Or just like, not that into people in general haha*

***katz the musical:*** *i mean whatever you are is totally cool*

***katz the musical:*** *sooooo are we friends still?*

***Will:*** *Of course*

***Will:*** *I love you Bev*

***katz the musical:*** *love you too lil bud*

***katz the musical:*** *let me follow you on insta again LMAOOOO*

***Will:*** *You unfollowed me? :(*

***katz the musical:*** *i was mad KJSJKDSHG*

***Will:*** *Yeah that's fair*

Will feeds Buster, makes dinner for himself and his father, and sits down to finish up an algebra worksheet due the next day. He trades memes back and forth with Beverly like nothing ever happened, sends Hannibal a picture of the woods behind his house, and tells Zeller he has a huge nose.

Life is good, he thinks. It feels nice to have friends. He thinks he should communicate like this more often.

## VI

**December 25, 2021**

*Will: Are you with family today?*

Hannibal isn't.

They hardly celebrate Christmas; Hannibal's family is Jewish. Though he occasionally gets a phone call with his uncle on Christmas day, he doesn't do much. Everything around him is closed for the holiday. Snow falls over Paris, and there's a gentle breeze whistling through the streets. Hannibal sits at the window of their tiny Parisian apartment, looking over the street.

It's deserted. That, in and of itself, is not strange. It's Christmas day, after all, and there's certainly no reason for people to be out and away from their families. Hannibal glances at the candle flickering next to him, then to the phone laying right beside it. His screen lights up again, insistent on his answering Will's question. Hannibal sighs.

*Hannibal: No.*

*Will: Oh, why not?*

*Hannibal: We don't celebrate Christmas.*

Hannibal sets his phone aside, picks up his sketchbook once more, and taps his pencil against his chin. School is out. Chiyoh is asleep, her faint snoring carrying across the tiny apartment. He stands.

It's late, after all. He may as well make dinner.

They don't have much in their kitchenette--the fridge isn't very large, and the cabinets are only good for dry foods. But they have flour, and yeast, and the tap water isn't so bad after a filter. So Hannibal pulls out their bread--freshly made, by his own hand--and makes a sandwich. After a few moments, he makes Chiyoh one, too, and wraps it in paper towels for her to enjoy once she wakes up.

Christmas isn't a good day for Hannibal. He never enjoys it--he tries in vain to forget those weeks in the cabin with his sketchbook, his reading, even sleeping. But it never escapes him; rather, he never escapes it. He never escapes the fact of his childhood, how he held his sister close even in her death, when he could not save her. He consumed her instead. It's horrible. She's a part of him. Hannibal checks his phone again.

*Will: I don't really celebrate Christmas either*

*Hannibal: Are you Jewish?*

*Will: No? We're just poor lol*

***Will:*** Are YOU Jewish??

***Hannibal:*** Yes. Hanukkah this year was the same as normal.

***Will:*** Wait wasn't Hanukkah when you had that

***Will:*** Nvm

***Hannibal:*** What have you done today, dear Will?

Hannibal doesn't get a response for a while after that. He doesn't mind, though; his mind is less distracted, his hunger is sated by his sandwich dinner, and his apartment is so warm that he can't feel the biting cold from the window just a few centimeters from his face.

"Hannibal?" The sound of Chiyoh's low, feminine voice startles him; he turns around quickly, blinking at the bleary-eyed woman in their bed. Now that Hannibal thinks about it, bunk beds would probably suit the space better. He doesn't care that much. "Good evening."

Hannibal's lips quirk up into a smile. She's always so formal, Chiyoh, an icicle on the hottest summer day. She doesn't melt, never abandons her wariness and her cold demeanor. It's endearing. Hannibal raises his hands to speak to her, giving her a wave. "Good evening," he signs. "I made a sandwich for you, if you want it."

Chiyoh raises an eyebrow, then looks towards their kitchenette. Hannibal points at the wrapped parcel on the counter; Chiyoh nods, seemingly trying to hide a smile of her own. Hannibal knows that she knows how snobbish he is. Pedestrian food like sandwiches doesn't usually appeal to him. Her smile fades when she realizes--supposedly--why Hannibal didn't want to cook. She stands to retrieve it. Hannibal looks back down at his sketchbook.

***Will:*** My dad got me a coloring book.

***Will:*** It kinda sucks but I've been coloring in it anyway lol

***Will:*** Bad quality paper

***Hannibal:*** I'm glad you received a present.

***Hannibal:*** I've been distracted as of late, but I had meant to send you something earlier. I'm afraid it won't arrive until January.

***Will:*** That's fine

***Will:*** I uh

***Will:*** Didn't think to get you anything

***Will:*** Sorry

That stung.

Hannibal considers himself above such petty things as *gifts* ; he doesn't celebrate Christmas, so he doesn't care. Even gifts for Hanukkah, the traditional nine, are peripheral to him. So he sits back in his chair, ignores Chiyoh shuffling around the apartment, and ponders. Why does it bother him?

He doesn't celebrate. He doesn't even *like* Christmas. Was it that he had bothered to send Will a package--French snacks, a collection of drawings, and a letter--and had received nothing in kind? But Hannibal hadn't put much effort into it, really. Was it that he had bothered at all?

Was it that Will didn't think of him like he thought of Will?

That thought took him off guard, but after a moment of contemplation Hannibal decides that that is the case. He wants Will to think of him. He doesn't care if a gift is small. But Hannibal doesn't crave others' approval. He is alone in himself, he cares only for his own opinion. It shakes him to his core that he might value Will's.

***Hannibal:*** *That's alright. Your company is enough.*

Hannibal is nothing if not polite, after all. And despite his flaws, Hannibal likes Will.

Loves him, even, if only platonically, and if only because Will said this to him first. Hannibal turns off his phone.

## **January 1, 2022**

Italy is quite a bit further south than France--especially Paris--and the weather is much warmer. The sun is even shining on the city of Florence, with ten-degree weather and the crooning of a mysterious songbird lighting up the landscape. Hannibal likes it here, likes the easy familiarity of Italy and the history baked into every cobblestone. Rome has always held a fascination for him, from the great emperors and consuls to the mystique of an average plebeian's life on Roman streets.

It is here that he commits his first murder.

Christmas was never a good time for Hannibal, and his Christmases always had him thinking. He thought about what he might do, if ever he found Mischa's attackers. He thought he might feel something for him but the cold, ironclad thirst for vengeance which had entrapped his heart. And so he found himself with his fingers around the throat of Enrikas Dortlich.

Hannibal remembered the plane crash. He remembered how the survivors had wandered across the snowy landscape, how they had found themselves in this remote area, how they had invaded the cabin where he hid with his sister. He remembered, afterwards, reading the news on the orphanage's sole computer, seeing *2013 plane crash* and how they had conveniently left Mischa out of the narrative. And Hannibal remembered his blinding rage. He remembered how he had felt, that helplessness which had taken his bones hostage. And he uses this pain, this anger, this grief--which he has not allowed himself to feel in quite a long time--to strangle Enrikas Dortlich, just as he had done Mischa.

It feels like nothing.

Hannibal kneels by his victim's corpse, touching his face with the back of his hand--because Hannibal is nothing if not careful, clad in a clean, new hoodie, with a hairnet keeping his golden locks from falling onto the ground--and feels nothing. He doesn't feel like an avenger. It doesn't feel good. It doesn't even feel bad. He feels no guilt. No anguish. No consideration for the life he has taken. He feels nothing.

He cuts Enrikas's cheeks from his face, careful to separate the fatty meat from the bone, and wraps them in Ziploc bags. He stows them in his pocket. He wonders what he should do now.

It's dark outside. Enrikas had been here on holiday, Hannibal reasoned--perhaps Hannibal should return him to his family. After six in the evening, the streets get quiet as people return home to be with their families or their soap operas. The sky gets dark early in the winter, after all, and though Florence is beautiful it is filled with criminals around every corner. Hannibal wraps Enrikas's body in a garbage bag, picks him up, and carries him to the Bardini Garden.

There he finds flowers. Fitting, that they should be lilies. A bouquet of them symbolizes innocence, and Hannibal quite likes the idea of making a striking statement. He sets Enrikas's body on a bench, closes his eyes, carefully selects the lilies he'd like and places them in Enrikas's hands.

It's far too gentle for such a monster. Hannibal turns away.

## **January 20, 2022**

Paris is still covered in snow. Hannibal, however, is free to move around in the streets, as carefully plowed and salted as they are. And so he does, humming to himself as he enters a little general store on the corner of his street. He's not poor, not anymore, and even more importantly he's an adult, now, so he buys a cheap bottle of wine. The bell jingles above his head as he leaves.

Hannibal sits at his table, pushed right up against the window and looking out over the street. He takes his plastic glass and pours another helping of wine.

"Happy birthday," murmurs Chiyoh, setting down her bags as she enters. Hannibal doesn't startle, doesn't turn around, doesn't acknowledge that he heard her come in aside from taking a long sip of his cheap alcohol. It burns his throat. It stinks like ethanol--the grapes aren't enough to cover up the smell. An upside to cheap alcohol, he figures--it gets you drunk. And Hannibal certainly doesn't feel sober.

Hannibal waves at her, signaling that he hears her, and then turns back to the window. Chiyoh crosses the room and folds her arms. "What are you doing?"

She sounds like his mother. She sounds like she'd scold him, maybe take his alcohol away. Hannibal thinks of his crumbling castle, the estate he was born to inherit, the place that had been commandeered by the state and turned into the place where he closed in on himself. Chiyoh sits next to him, instead, takes his plastic glass and a long swig of the wine.

"This is disgusting," she declares. It's so surprising that Hannibal laughs.

"It is," he says softly. Chiyoh blinks. He hasn't spoken in a while. It's not that he can't speak, of course, but rather that he prefers not to. His throat feels hoarse. Whether it's from the burn of the wine or the smoky memory irritating the lining of his lungs or even the nightmare he had had, the night before, where he went outside to scream and to avoid waking Chiyoh up (though he was sure she was awake, anyway), he doesn't know. "It was only ten Euros."

"We could ask for something better." Chiyoh sets her hands on the table. "If you wanted to."

Hannibal snatches the bottle away from the table, cradling it. The fierce, powerful urge to protect it tightens his fingers and burdens his face with its animosity, its malice. It's *his*. He bought it. He doesn't pay for the apartment, or most of their food, or even his school supplies. But he paid for this, this cheap bottle of wine that none of his family members would *ever* bother paying for. It's his. These sensibilities extend far past his fingertips.

He doesn't even belong to himself. His love isn't his own. His life isn't his own. But this--this wine, this cheap, disgusting 2021 vintage--this is his.

Hannibal sets the wine down and clears his throat. Embarrassing, how he had let those fleeting emotions get the better of him. He stretches his fingers and feels the throat of Enrikas Dortlich in his hands. The mirage fades. He forces himself to smile at his companion.

"We could," he says. "I would rather not."

"Okay."

They sit in silence for a long while. Chiyoh had brought a bag or two in, Hannibal had heard it. He turns to look by the door, where Chiyoh's reusable plastic bags sit tantalizingly against the wall. She stands, sensing his question before he even asks, and retrieves them. From within the blue bag she withdraws a package.

The return address is his uncle's. Chiyoh blinks at him, the warmest expression she seems to be capable of mustering; he nods in kind. Though this package comes from Robertas Lecter, his steady hands tremble as he rips it open.

It's a plain silk robe. Hannibal glances up at Chiyoh. "Do you know if they will be visiting?"

Chiyoh doesn't need to ask who *they* are. She nods. "This weekend."

"Thank you." Hannibal pauses. He doesn't want to ask. He doesn't want to *need* these things. But he stands, and folds his hands, and whispers his request for a hug. And though Chiyoh is cold, she's his sister. He buries his face in her shoulder, fine tremors running through his body. He breaks when her fingers run through his golden hair.

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